2006 Annual Report N.C. Million Acre Initiative

Presented to the Governor of North Carolina and the Environmental Review Commission of the North Carolina General Assembly

Sept. 1, 2007

By the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources Office of Conservation and Community Affairs

The Latest Numbers

At the end of the eighth full year of the North Carolina Million Acre Initiative (Jan. 1, 1999 – Dec. 31, 2006), private and public land protection partners across the state have permanently protected an additional **481,315** "Million Acre" acres. These partners reported adding **75,794** of those acres during the 2006 calendar year. This is an increase in the rate of land protection in North Carolina from the previous year, due largely to the initial acquisition of industrial timber company lands (the North Carolina Chapter of The Nature Conservancy agreed to a purchase of significant acreage from International Paper in September, 2006).

The table at the end of this report describes in detail the number of acres protected by sector (state government, local government, etc.), by program, and by time period. To avoid confusion, only official reports of new acquisitions (from surveys, interviews and questionnaires) are counted in the final total. Estimates for non-respondents are not included.

The lands protected in 2006 represent important natural areas for habitat, recreation opportunities, working forests, and riparian buffers that maintain water quality and protect floodplains, among others. However, the amount of land currently protected each year is insufficient to meet the goal of permanently protecting an additional million acres by Dec. 31, 2009 (G.S. 113A-240 and 241). In fact, at our current pace, land protection efforts do not even match the rate at which natural and agricultural lands are being lost to development in the State, which currently amounts to about 100,000 acres per year. The primary barrier to land protection is the availability of public and private funding for new projects. If we intend to meet the Million Acre goal by the end of 2009, more money for land protection must be found. The figure below illustrates our progress toward the Million Acre goal to date.

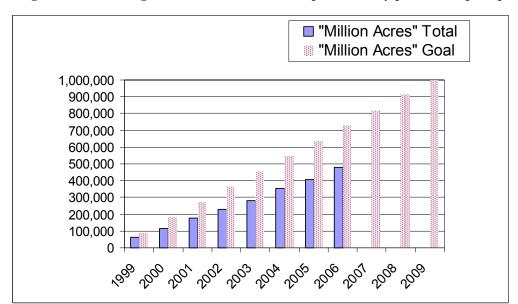


Table 1: Progress toward our goal of one million acres of permanently protected open space

The Program

In addition to working to increase the rate at which land is being protected in North Carolina, the Million Acre Initiative continues to work towards making information about land protection tools and techniques more broadly available, and to encourage conservation planning. As part of the One North Carolina Naturally program, the Million Acre Initiative and other partners continue to slowly but steadily increase awareness among North Carolinians about the need for additional land conservation to protect our valuable natural ecosystems.

A new development for the program in the past year has been the development of a statewide Strategic Conservation Plan (SCP). North Carolina's population is projected to increase 50% over the next 25 years. At the current rate of development, four million new residents will translate to eight million more acres developed. While we can't say for certain how much land will be permanently altered in the next 25 years, it is safe to say that much of the development is likely to occur on lands that currently have forests or farms. In order to ensure the ecological health of North Carolina, we need to not only increase the rate of land protection, but to prioritize which lands should be conserved, versus which lands are best suited for development

to accommodate our new residents. The North Carolina SCP was born out of the need to develop a strategic process which will coordinate and implement the state's conservation efforts over the next 25 years.

North Carolina's SCP will use scientific and strategic analysis to identify and prioritize the essential high quality natural resources across the state, as well as identify crucial protection gaps in our state's network of supporting ecosystems. This plan will highlight areas of opportunity for collaborative conservation that will contribute to sustaining the most significant natural resources across the state. The plan consists of a series of natural resource assessments that highlight the essential and most ecologically functional areas of land and water from the mountains to the coast. This assessment will result in several GIS data layers, which can be used by individual organizations, state and local agencies, or funding groups to inform decisions about conservation and/or compatible land use planning in North Carolina. Any combination of the assessment data layers can be studied to inform and add value to local conservation and land use planning goals and missions. However, on a statewide basis, it is the goal of this analysis to show those areas that meet the overall needs of the larger landscape.

In order to address the most important natural resource needs of North Carolina's wildlife, native plants, and humans, a series of six different assessments will be included in the plan. They have been divided up into two main sections -- ecosystem functions and ecosystem resources. Ecosystem functions consist of: the essential supporting landscape needs for terrestrial wildlife and its habitat; requirements for aquatic wildlife and its habitat; overall landscape function and connectivity; and, areas that are critical for maintaining ecosystem processes (e.g. wetlands, floodplains, stream buffers, and fire). The ecosystem resources section includes the essential supporting landscape needs for agriculture, forestry, fisheries, water source preservation, and recreation and open space.

In order to carefully develop the process and modeling, the first assessment is focused on the ecosystem function section. A first draft of this assessment is currently being made available for review and comment. Development of the assessments is an iterative process, to be updated every six months. This preliminary assessment has produced GIS data layers showing the

locations of the most significant natural resource core areas and connectors, representing a network of intact ecosystem functions. Even with these early results, conservation opportunities can be clearly identified in the areas of highly ranked lands that are not yet formally protected. However, large questions still need to be answered such as: "What areas are critical for protection of natural resource functions and services in North Carolina?" and "What will be required to ensure the viability of the significant natural resources identified in these analyses?"

Looking Ahead

The **75,794** acres permanently protected in 2006 was an unexpectedly strong step forward, due in large part to the previously mentioned sale of timber lands from International Paper. Ironically, a side effect of this major land purchase was to temporarily tap out the funds available from some of our most reliable conservation partners, demonstrating that the limits in North Carolina's conservation funding are real and continue to remain a challenge. With little federal money available, the burden for land protection falls squarely within the State.

As noted in last year's report, it will be difficult to meet the Million Acre goal without a working lands component targeted towards maintaining local production of agricultural and forest products. While partners in agricultural conservation have made exciting progress in mapping priority areas, funding for farmland preservation and conservation of forestry lands remains in short supply.

By building momentum for additional conservation funding, the Land for Tomorrow Coalition was successful in helping pass Senate Bill 1122, the "Land and Water Conservation Study." This act created the Joint Legislative Commission on Land and Water Conservation (hereafter "the Commission") to evaluate current sources of conservation funding, collect information on tools to protect land and water, hold public meetings in three different areas of the state and draft a report summarizing their recommendations to address funding needs for land and water conservation. The public meetings were well attended, with 200-300 people at each meeting, and with the majority of those requesting to speak in very strong support of additional conservation funding in North Carolina. In the report to the General Assembly, the Commission

recognized the good work that most of the conservation partners in North Carolina are already doing, and included findings from successful land and water conservation programs in other states. Common themes noted by the Commission from other states were summarized in seven 'best practices:' substantial state investment in land and water conservation; enabling local financing; providing state incentives for projects; allowing for the purchase of development rights; supporting public-private partnerships; conservation tax credits; and, partnerships with federal agencies.

The primary finding and recommendation of the Commission is that "additional funding is needed to finance land and water conservation," and that "a larger dedicated source of revenue is needed to adequately address conservation and preservation needs." The Commission determined that a balanced approach based on debt financing and dedicated sources of tax or fee revenue is the best approach for providing these needs, and identified a number of possible revenue sources. While no direct appropriations were made, the final budget for 2008 includes authorization of \$120 million in Certificates of Participation. This action will enable some partners to take advantage of existing short-term conservation opportunities, but much like a bond, the Certificates of Participation will have to be repaid. The Parks and Recreation Trust Fund and Natural Heritage Trust Fund will be obligated for \$100 million for this purpose, thereby limiting the amount of funding available for conservation opportunities in the more distant future.

After Land Protection

A great deal of effort goes into protecting land, and each transaction involves much time and effort. There is generally much enthusiasm for the high-profile tasks of acquiring or "protecting" land, but perhaps a lack of appreciation for what is involved with proper management and stewardship of the land following its acquisition. This is a good time to step back and examine whether our conservation partners are growing in their capacity to match the new responsibilities of additional land. There are some encouraging signs of increased stewardship capacity, as well as efforts to coordinate conservation and ecological management across property boundaries. Examples include the Division of Parks and Recreation's hiring of its first Ecological Burn

Coordinator, the N.C. Prescribed Fire Council's formation and its first statewide meeting in December 2006, and a Fire Learning Network being initiated in the Southeast Coastal Plain, which has helped regional land managers gather together and look for ways to share scarce resources.

Some land trusts are also taking on more ecological management, which is a positive step but can stretch limited staff and resources. In 2006 the Land Trust for Central North Carolina encountered land management on a large scale with its acquisition of the Bingham Lands, a 1,160-acre tract of forestland surrounding the Low Water Bridge along the nationally-significant Uwharrie River. This tract had been identified as a conservation priority through riparian corridor protection planning, and it provides five miles of mature hardwood buffer along one of the Piedmont's finest paddling stretches. Funding for this project was made possible though the N.C. Ecosystem Enhancement Program (EEP) and private donations, as well as the generosity of the former landowners. To deal with the land management and stewardship issues of this tract and others, The Land Trust for Central North Carolina formed a stewardship committee in 2006. The stewardship committee's activities include: developing management strategies for feeowned properties (~3,000 acres); coordinating research opportunities with Catawba College and other educational institutions; evaluating requests for recreational uses of fee property (including hunting); coordinating conservation easement monitoring with staff; and, coordinating volunteer management efforts at fee properties.

These are perhaps typical issues that have to be addressed in stewardship, and there are a variety of others. Green Infrastructure, a term that elevates attention to the true network of natural systems, is also a useful analogy -- our wildlife habitats and recreation areas need some level of maintenance or stewardship, much the same way that our "gray" infrastructure of roads, bridges, and sewers needs periodic maintenance to maintain its integrity. All conservation entities (local governments, State agencies and private conservation organizations) would appreciate more help with stewardship. The Million Acre numbers demonstrate that, to its credit, the State is currently the dominant source of funding for open space protection. The State of North Carolina should ensure that its investment remains sound, and that conservation values are maintained through stewardship. Activities such as prescribed burning and control of invasive exotic species to

promote wildlife habitat will be important components of such a strategy. One suggestion would be to offer some limited funding to land managers. It could be distributed or awarded competitively to those projects demonstrating greater ecosystem function benefit.

Conclusion

Understanding the relationships among the priority areas for conservation will help us target our protection efforts so that we maximize both the cost effectiveness and the long-term value of our investment. As tens of thousands of acres each year are permanently altered from their existing natural condition for new development, raising awareness about the importance of setting aside some portion of our critical and unique lands is essential. A combination of planning and coordination at the local, regional and state levels, coupled with adequate funding and incentives to implement the plans, is crucial. Given our uncertain future, the partners listed in the attached summary table will no doubt continue to increase their protection efforts, and the One North Carolina Naturally program will look for new ways to expand land conservation. These efforts and new ones will continue to make the future greener for North Carolina.

Acres Under Permanent Protection

(note: a blank cell means no data were collected. 0 means no land was protected)

DENR - SOIL AND WATER							
State Agency			Acres				
DENR - FOREST RESOURCES state forest 0.833 1,028 7.885 117 7.97				Acres Protected	Subtotal through	Acres Protected	_
DENR - SOIL AND WATER	State Agency	category	12/04	1/05 - 12/05	12/05	1/06 - 12/06	Acre" Total
DENR - SOLL AND WATER	DENR - FOREST RESOURCES	state forest	6,833	1,028	7,861	117	7,978
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State trails	DENR - PARKS AND REC.	state park	23,551	6,172	29,723	4,503	34,226
Substance 2		state natural area	5,229	775	6,004	643	6,647
DENR - COASTAL MNGMT. Coastal reserves 28,961 0 28,961 0 28,961 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0		state trails		765	765	189	954
Submerged lands		state rec area	2		2		
DoA&CS - PLANT INDUSTRY	DENR - COASTAL MNGMT.	coastal reserves	28,961		28,961		
Other Lands		•			-		
DCR - HISTORIC SITES state historic sites 566 73 639 519 1,15	DoA&CS - PLANT INDUSTRY	· ·	9,528	19			
STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM					-		0
SUBTOTALS 182,626 22,512 205,138 47,943 253,08			566	73	639	519	1,158
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SUBTOTALS 37,434 2,159 39,593 1,273 40,86	PROGRAM	wetlands reserve	10,429	1,761	12,190	1,122	13,312
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Local Land Trusts							
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TOTALS 352.090 53,431 405,521 75.794 481.31							
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^{*}Formerly Wetlands Restoration Program. EEP closed on 3,748 acres in 2006; 2,518 of those acres are held by other state agencies or land trusts.

^{**}Local governments include LWCF projects closed, PARTF projects funded, CWMTF local projects closed, and counties that responded to information requests.

^{***}National Forests in North Carolina reports on fiscal year.

^{****25} local land trusts that regularly partner with the Conservation Trust for North Carolina. Local land trusts also conveyed 5,512 acres to local, state, and federal government in 2006

^{*****}The Nature Conservancy closed on 81,875 acres in 2006, including 76,456 acres of International Paper lands.

Many of these acres are transferring to the State of North Carolina.